



Harm Reduction: Advice from Leaders in the Field

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and the Family and Youth Services Bureau recognize that all communities are different and that there is not a one-size-fits-all program plan. In this tip sheet, leaders of FYSB-funded agencies share how they are using harm reduction to better serve youth in their communities. Some of these tips may help your programs as well.

1. Don't let a large service area get in the way of effective outreach.

Vicki Lawton at Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska

Our service area is 5.5 hours driving distance across. When you work with youth, especially youth in crisis, you realize pretty quickly that timing can really matter - if you take 3 hours to get to a youth who needs help, you may be too late. We have set up "satellite sites" all over our service area to help limit response times. A satellite site is often just a host family's house, but the key is that we have a number of people in all of our 11 counties who are willing to serve as a first contact and offer a safe space in short order so that a youth doesn't have to wait for someone from our main office to reach them.

2. If you have more demand for shelter than you have supply, consider screening by age to make sure the youngest, most vulnerable youth are safe.

Heather Brown at Outside In in Portland, Oregon

Unfortunately, the current demands for youth shelter exceed our local capacity. Youth are being turned away most nights because the shelters are full. We make sure every possible bed is full before any youth is turned away, but limited resources are a reality here in Portland, Oregon. Studies have shown that younger youth are more vulnerable on the streets so we prioritize shelter entry by age. The shelter currently operates with a window of access for younger youth by opening at 8:45 p.m. before opening up for older youth at 9:30 p.m.

3. Keep those who transition out of your program connected to your services, but also maintain a youth only environment in your drop in center or other common areas.

Jon Bradley at Preble Street in Portland, Maine

Preble Street is fortunate to have multiple funding streams for their drop-in center and shelter and is therefore able to provide those services to youth 18 and over, as FYSB-funded BCP services are limited to youth less than 18 years of age. Jon states that it is important for Preble Street to maintain the 12-21 year age range so that all the youth feel safe and comfortable in our common spaces, so that they feel the space is designed for them. Preble Street also operates other non-FYSB funded programs which enable them to provide services to youth over 22 if a youth could still benefit from services. Jon states that cutting youth off from services could be very damaging to a young person's sense of direction and trust and could harm their stability. Preble Street utilizes a diversified funding stream to be able to open a back door on their center so that youth 22 or older can still meet with case managers and receive mental health and all other non-group services, but they can't just hang out in the center with younger youth.

4. Make sure you have different types of housing available to support youth as they gain stability.

Heather Brown at Outside In in Portland, Oregon

The path to recovery isn't always a straight line and it can look very different for different people. We have a range of housing options available for youth. This range includes both transitional and permanent supportive housing but it also includes wet housing, damp housing, and clean and sober housing. If a youth is ready for clean and sober housing, but they are placed in housing where they are surrounded by people who are still using it can very quickly lead to relapse. If a youth who is not yet ready for clean and sober housing is placed in such a unit, they will likely find themselves homeless again. We work with youth on an individual basis to find a housing solution that will help them along their path to recovery. This allows us to support youth to move into more clean and sober housing options as they progress in their recovery.



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A Harm- Reduction Approach Helped Tricia Find a Job, Housing, and Direction in Maine

Last year, Tricia was 18. She lived with her mom in Bangor, Maine where she attended college and worked the night shift at a shipment company. Then, her mom died. She had no transportation so she could no longer work and couldn't pay bills. Her very stable and secure life disintegrated in a just a few months. She relied on family and friends for a while and moved to another town to follow a job lead but nothing stuck. It isn't easy to find work that pays enough to make ends meet when you don't have transportation and have very little experience.

Tricia is an idealist. She is an artist and dreams of being able to make enough to live on from her art. She spent several months hop- ping from town to town selling art on the street and sleeping wherever she could: at hostels, on the street, at houses of people she would meet at coffee shops or she would spend the late night hours in 24 hour diners. She has come to realize that, although she has always felt lucky, her life wasn't always safe. She was starting to hitchhike regularly and had been followed by men late at night on the streets. One night last June at a Denny's in Portland, she was preparing to hitchhike out of town when the woman behind the counter told her about Preble Street and paid for her cab ride to Preble Street's Lighthouse Shelter.

She and her case manager have worked together over the last six months to create a plan for stability designed for her and based on her experiences and gifts. Chris Bicknell, the Director of Youth Services, said "When Tricia arrived she was unwilling to engage in services and look at any options for employment and had the self-defined goal of 'traveling' (train hopping) and selling her art on the streets. We did a lot of work with her about the risks involved with such choices both for the short and long term. She even did a little traveling after about 3 months with us, but returned within two weeks and began to engage in case management, mental health, education, and employment services. If we required her to participate in services that we deemed necessary, she would have been more resistant to engaging with staff and our programs when she was ready and it could have scared her off altogether. Instead, we were able to let her explore her options at her pace while being realistic about the risks and our concerns in a way that she did not feel judged or forced into a decision she wasn't ready for."

Tricia participated in Preble Street's Street Academy where she gained help finding a job. She was offered an internship at the University of Southern Maine (USM) through a stipend program where Preble Street paid her salary for a trial period as she gained experience. After the internship was over, her employers were so impressed they offered her a full-time job. She begins this new position in two-weeks and two-weeks ago she moved into her own apartment. She will also be able to take some college classes for free at USM as a part of her employment agreement.

She says that what made the difference at Preble Street was the way the staff had a personalized approach and respected her idealism and her art. They recognized that individual relationships matter, allowing youth to switch from one case-manager to another with- out any hard feelings. "The rules at Preble Street are there for a reason, the rules clearly improve safety and help youth find stability," she said. She was empowered by her role in interviewing new staff for the program and said that the staff at Preble Street cared about her views. "As an artist and an idealist, I have always felt like a bit of an outsider like I have a different view of the world than my family and others... At Preble Street, they didn't try to change that or restrict me before they would help me find my footing."

Source:

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